

## Watch Out for Poison Ivy, Oak and Sumac!



Lake Berryessa Park Ranger Mike McGraw points out a cluster of poison ivy.

It's almost summer, and to many people that means outdoor fun: swimming, fishing, boating, skiing, biking, picnicking, camping, hiking, birding and so many other activities. But for those who are unaware – or maybe just a little careless – it can also mean the itch and burn from a rash caused by exposure to poison ivy, oak or sumac.

Most folks are susceptible to rashes caused by the plants' sap oil, called urushiol. The best way to prevent the rash is to avoid direct contact with the plants by keeping the skin covered when exposure is likely. But if you do come in contact, quickly wash off the oily sap with soap and cold water (not hot water; it can open the pores, letting the oil in!).

for desert areas, elevations above 4,000 feet, Alaska and Hawaii. The oil is extremely stable and can stay potent for years. You can get a rash from clothing, tools or even a sleeping bag that still have the oil from last summer or even from years back. Make sure you thoroughly wash any exposed items or use alcohol to dissolve the oil.

Poison ivy, oak and sumac belong to the plant genus known as *Toxicodendron* found throughout the United States except



So how do you identify the plants and avoid exposure and those nasty rashes altogether? Although it's suggested that people learn to recognize the poison ivy plant ("Leaves of three, leave them be"), this can be difficult, since poison ivy and its relatives are often mixed in with other vegetation and not noticed until after the rash has begun.



Poison ivy (top left and below) and poison oak (middle left) have three leaflets, while poison sumac (bottom left) more commonly has leaflets of five, seven or more that angle upward toward the top of the stem. In all of the plants, some leaves are notched, some leaves are not. New leaves are shiny and still somewhat reddish while older leaves are duller.



What it comes down to is this: although identifying these plants isn't easy to do, wearing long sleeves, long pants and shoes and socks is. So enjoy the great outdoors this summer – just be careful out there!